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Traditional Chinese Medicine - Basic Concepts, Clinical Applications and Scientific Basis

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The practice of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is flourishing in the United States, attracting increased interest by the health care industry, governmental agencies, scientific research community, media, and the public. A major component of CAM, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), is a comprehensive system of medicine with an elaborate theoretical framework, and it encompasses most practices classified as complementary medicine: electromagnetic therapy (acupuncture), bodywork (acupressure/massage), botanical medicine/natural products (herbal/dietary therapy) and body-mind practices (Tai-Chi/Qi Gong).

Developed over several millennia as the result of a continuous process of extensive clinical observation, testing, and critical thinking, TCM can be characterized as holistic, with strong emphasis on the integrity of the human body and its relationship with the social and natural environment. There is recognition of the impact that physical, nutritional, psychosocial and genetic factors have on health and disease. TCM focuses on health maintenance and the early stages of disease with emphasis on enhancing the body's natural resistance to disease. Other unique features of its theoretical framework and approach to health and disease include a systems perspective that focuses on process and function over structure. With its special emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, TCM stresses the importance of homeostasis and the requisite nature of a normal flow of an adequate amount of energy to maintain it.

In conventional medicine, the diagnostic process usually ends with a disease label independent of the individual it is manifesting in. In TCM, on the other hand, diagnosis requires weaving together a dynamic conceptualization of the entire sick individual, also known as the pathophysiological state or pattern (zheng). As a natural consequence of describing pathophysiological patterns (as opposed to disease entities) to guide therapeutics, there is less emphasis on specific causal factors. While conventional western medicine may be more effective in treating acute problems and achieving results much quicker, TCM therapeutics is especially adept at rebuilding the individual’s infrastructure and dealing with chronic and degenerative diseases. TCM is a system whose application covers the entire spectrum of clinical conditions, from the most severe to the minor. Therapeutic principles are matched to guide the selection of the appropriate treatment regimen of herbs/diet/acupuncture/exercise.

Recently, TCM has also become the subject of more intense scientific study in the Western world. Scientifically rigorous research has confirmed the clinical efficacy of acupuncture for

some conditions. In the 1997 National Institutes of Health Consensus Meeting on Acupuncture, experts reviewed high quality research data on acupuncture gave direction for future research as well as a list of several conditions for which acupuncture is found to be effective: post-operative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting and post-operative dental pain. Acupuncture was also recommended as an adjunct treatment or an acceptable alternative for addiction, stroke rehabilitation, asthma, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, carpal tunnel syndrome, low back pain, headache and pain syndromes such as fibromyalgia and myofascial pain. A biomedical explanation for acupuncture is evolving as many dedicated investigators have and continue to uncover neurochemical and neurophysiological basis in acupuncture's apparent efficacy.

Research on botanicals in the West is just beginning, with indications being revealed through both clinical trials and pharmacological research. Clinical trials on herbal medicine have provided positive Level II evidence for conditions such as hepatocellular carcinoma, eczema, and irritable bowel syndrome. Also, notable examples for which the pharmacological basis of Chinese herb efficacy has been elucidated include Artemisinin (Qinghaosu or Artemisia annua extract) for malaria, red yeast extract for lowering cholesterol and Huperzine A (isolated from Huperzia serrata) as a potential candidate to treat Alzheimer's disease.

As for massage therapy, recent studies have shown benefits for conditions such as fibromyalgia, sleep disturbance in elderly people and anxiety. Also, the slow movement of Tai Chi has been found to improve balance, flexibility and cardiovascular fitness and lower hypertension in elderly people.

The evolution of scientific research in TCM will involve the usage of innovative techniques as well as the incorporation of the theoretical basis of TCM in research design and implementation. In elucidating the mechanisms of acupuncture, innovative techniques such as functional MRI and PET scans will continue to be utilized. Continued research will expand acupuncture's clinical indications in the Western world. For botanicals, clinical research methodologists should take the theoretical construct and clinical approach of TCM into consideration when designing trials. Researchers should consider approaches other than conducting randomized controlled trials for the evaluation of the safety and efficacy of each product.

While scientific research continues, we should also recognize the research and practice of herbal therapies/acupuncture in China and other countries when making recommendations for clinical practice. TCM is a system of medicine that has and will continue to contribute to the health care of people around the world.